Free Schools and disadvantaged intakes

Abstract

The Free Schools policy in England has led to the opening of a number of new autonomous state-funded schools. This article uses data from the Annual Schools Census to present the proportions of socioeconomically disadvantaged children attending the first three waves of these schools. It updates and builds on previous work that focused on the student composition of the first wave of Free Schools (Gooch, 2011). The analysis compares the Free School intakes with other local schools and Local Authority (LA) data and seeks to establish whether they are taking an equal share of disadvantaged children in relation to their nearby competitors. Differences emerge between the different waves of schools with those that opened in 2011 generally underrepresenting disadvantaged children. In the second and third waves the picture is more mixed. It is also the case that Free Schools with a faith designation or an alternative or specialist curriculum appear particularly likely to have proportionally fewer disadvantaged children than might be expected based on their location. The potential impacts of having an increasing number of new schools with unbalanced intakes are discussed.

Key words: Free Schools, academies, admissions, segregation

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Introduction

The role of the education 'marketplace' continues to be of interest both in England and internationally. Issues of school choice and competition are not a new phenomenon, and have featured in education policy for decades. However, the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 saw the rapid expansion of the academies programme, resulting in thousands more schools converting to academy status. In addition, a new 'type' of academy, known as a Free School, came into existence. The government has claimed that both academies and Free Schools will contribute to increased diversity and choice within the education system, boosting standards through competition, autonomy and innovation (Cameron, 2011; Gove, 2011). Moreover, those introducing the Free Schools initiative argued that it would help to tackle inequality and disadvantage by providing more places in quality schools for children from poorer backgrounds (DfE 2011; Gove, 2011).

This paper seeks to establish the proportions of disadvantaged children attending Free Schools and their levels of socioeconomic segregation when compared with other local schools. In this context, the term segregation refers to the clustering and separation of different groups of children based on their personal characteristics (such as socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, religion or prior attainment). A number of studies have indicated that to have different groups of children clustered together in schools has no academic benefit (Goldsmith, 2011) and a negative social impact (see, for example, Gorard and See, 2013 for a fuller discussion). Some of the most recent evidence suggests that the intakes of independent state-funded schools have the potential to increase between-school SES segregation in England (Gorard, 2014). Comparisons of formal test scores internationally show that those with stratified school systems and higher levels of socioeconomic inequality are more likely to have lower average attainment (Condron, 2013) as well as less social cohesion and civic engagement (Green and Janmaat, 2013). A policy which may possibly enhance such stratification, therefore, warrants careful monitoring and scrutiny.

The Swedish and American models

In introducing the Free Schools policy in England, the Conservative party were keen to replicate school reforms which had occurred in Sweden and America (Gove, 2011). In the early 1990s both countries legislated for the opening of state-funded schools operating outside of local government control. Advocates in both countries have argued that attendance at these schools can positively affect attainment (Bohlmark and Lindahl, 2012; Hoxby *et al*., 2009) with studies in America particularly highlighting some academic benefits for disadvantaged or low ability children (Abdulkadiroglu *et al.*, 2009; Dobbie and Fryer, 2009). Recent analyses, however, have suggested that the picture is less clear and that charter or Free Schools do not

necessarily lead to positive academic effects (Allen, 2010; CREDO, 2013; Gleason *et al.*, 2010).

Several studies in Sweden and America have explored the effects of school choice policies on increased social and ethnic clustering of students (Bunar, 2010; Frankenberg *et al.*, 2010; Miron *et al.*, 2010). In both countries the composition of independent state-funded schools differs considerably when compared with their traditional community school counterparts. In Sweden, children attending Free Schools are more likely to have parents who have continued education beyond the compulsory stage and more likely to be "pupils with a foreign background" (Skolverket, 2006, p. 17). In America, national survey data show that charter schools are more likely on average to take poorer students and those from ethnic minority backgrounds (CREDO, 2013; NCES, 2012); the negative academic and social impacts of such imbalanced intakes have been highlighted in research by Cobb and Glass (2009) and Ni (2011).

Autonomy and admissions in England

Academies and Free Schools are not the first types of autonomous school in England to cause concern due to inequity in the admissions process (Allen, 2007; Allen *et al.*, 2010; West *et al.*, 2004). In the 1980s grant-maintained (GM) schools were introduced in England and Wales as an alternative to LA controlled institutions, contributing to a more marketised system through competition and increased parental choice (West and Pennell, 1997). Their legal status granted them a number of freedoms including being able to operate as their own admissions authority and opting to become partially selective. As a result their intakes were found to be considerably more affluent than LA run comprehensives (Benn and Chitty, 1996).

Faith schools have always been able to control their own admissions procedures, selecting proportions of their intakes based on adherence to a particular religion or denomination. Studies have shown the disproportionately advantaged intakes of voluntary-aided faith schools in England (Allen and West, 2011), and have highlighted some of the unfair (and in some cases unlawful) practices which occur in order to select students (West *et al.*, 2004). Whilst tightening of the Admissions Codes in 2007 and 2009 has resulted in some changes in the composition of voluntary-aided schools (Allen *et al.*, 2010) there is still evidence to suggest that many faith schools are not admitting socioeconomically balanced intakes (Oldfield *et al.*, 2013; Rogers, 2012).

The expansion of the specialist schools programme also raised concerns about increasing socioeconomic segregation between schools (Castle and Evans, 2006; Gorard *et al.*, 2003). The initiative was introduced following the 1988 Education Reform Act in an attempt to further diversify the state secondary system and provide additional 'choice' for parents. Those schools that opted-in to the programme received additional funding and decided upon a subject specialism or combination of

subject specialisms. By the time that the specialist schools programme was abolished in 2010, 93% of secondary schools in England had adopted the status. An in-depth study of the composition of some specialist schools showed those that had increasingly privileged intakes over time also had autonomy over their admissions arrangements (Gorard and Taylor, 2001).

The expansion of the academies programme

The first three City Academies opened under the Labour government in England in 2000, and like City Technology Colleges (CTCs) and grant-maintained (GM) schools before them, were independent of Local Authority (LA) control. The earliest academies were replacements for 'underperforming' existing schools in deprived, urban areas. Their numbers increased steadily and by May 2010, there were 203 open in England. A change in administration, however, saw a dramatic development of the initiative with all schools being able to apply to become an academy. By January 2014 there were 3,613 academies operating in England (DfE, 2014a).

As well as encouraging the conversion of thousands of schools to academy status, the current government also introduced a new type of academy known as Free Schools. This initiative allows academy chains, businesses, faith groups, charities, parents or teachers to set-up brand new schools. There were 174 Free Schools open at the end of the 2013-2014 academic year and a further 102 approved to open in September 2014 (Adams, 2013)

Academies have control over their own admissions arrangements (whilst working within the legislation of the 2012 Admissions Code). Decisions over whether to use catchment areas and feeder primary schools, faith criteria or banding or admit up to 10% of their intake based on aptitude are decided by the governing body of the school rather than the LA. Academies also have increased freedoms in their choice of curriculum, can decide the length of the school day and holidays and can employ unqualified teaching staff.

Proponents of academies in England have cited their apparent successes in improving educational outcomes (Gove, 2012) although a number of studies attribute improvement in academic standards to a shift towards less disadvantaged intakes following the move to academy status (Gorard, 2005; PwC, 2008; Wilson, 2011). Recent longitudinal analyses of GCSE examination results between 2007 and 2012 also found no improvement in attainment for academy schools in comparison to that in other types of school (Gorard, 2014; Rutt and Styles, 2013). These findings raise questions about whether the increase in autonomous schools is resulting in any gain in education standards in England, and whether the programme is benefitting the children that it originally set out to help.

Free School intakes in England

As with the initial sponsored academies programme in 2000, the Free Schools policy was originally introduced with claims that it would target deprivation and provide improved educational opportunities for those from the poorest backgrounds (DfE, 2010; 2011). Whilst Free Schools are a type of academy, and are also required to adhere to the Admissions Code (DfE, 2012), they differ in the sense that the majority of them are completely new institutions. Some commentators have suggested that those setting them up will predominantly represent white, middle-class families (Stokes *et al*., 2012; Vasagar and Shepherd, 2011) and research into the demographics of Free School proposers has shown that those involved were on average not seeking to serve disadvantaged communities (Higham, 2013).

Due to the recent introduction of the Free Schools policy, however, there is still little known about the families that they are attracting, the children that they are admitting and the methods that they are using to do this. An evaluation of the admissions policies used by secondary Free Schools suggested that although the schools were adhering to the 2012 Admissions Code legislation, and in many cases, were using similar criteria to that of their Local Authorities, a number of the schools were using oversubscription criteria which could lead to further segregation (Morris, 2014). Early analyses of Free School intakes have shown that pupils are more likely to travel further to school than children at neighbouring maintained or academy schools and less likely to have English as an Additional Language (EAL) (NAO, 2013). There is also evidence that most of the first 24 schools admitted proportionally fewer FSM children than other local schools or the LA where they were situated (Burn-Murdoch, 2012; Gooch, 2011).

This paper builds on these previous FSM analyses, focusing on the levels of socioeconomic disadvantage within the first three waves of Free Schools which opened in 2011, 2012 and 2013. It attempts to address the following closely linked questions:

- Are the first three waves of Free Schools taking an even share of disadvantaged children?
- How does the share of FSM children attending Free Schools compare with other local schools and within the LAs where they are situated?

It is important to stress here that this analysis does not attempt to make any causal links between Free Schools and pupil clustering. The methods used provide a purely descriptive picture of the current student composition of the schools in a simple attempt to inform public debate surrounding the policy (Heath, 2000). It should also be remembered that the initiative is still very much in its infancy. Only further research in the field will allow us to see whether the findings here appear to be part of any ongoing trend.

Methods

The analyses here are based on data from the Annual Schools Census (ASC) which is administered annually by the Department for Education (DfE). Schools are required to submit details about their student body on a range of indicators including sex, age, ethnicity, FSM take-up and eligibility and Special Educational Needs (SEN) status.

For the purposes of this study Free School Meals eligibility (FSMe) rather than FSM take-up is used as a proxy for disadvantage. This is to ensure that children entitled to FSM but who opt not to claim it (Iniesta-Martinez and Evans, 2012) are included in the analysis. Whilst there has been considerable discussion surrounding the validity of FSM as an indicator of poverty (Harwell and LeBeau, 2010; Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010), for the purposes of this study, and in order to gain an overview of the characteristics of the children attending Free Schools, it is thought to be sufficient.

Special schools, alternative provision schools and sixth form colleges have been omitted from the study, leaving a total of 142 mainstream Free School schools to be analysed (Table 1). In addition to exploring the share of disadvantaged children attending each Free School, the same data for the six closest schools have been collated for comparison purposes. These schools were identified using the DfE's *Compare Schools* online tool. Only data for mainstream, state-funded schools admitting the same age group have been used and, where necessary, single-sex status is taken into account. For example, if a Free School is a single-sex girls' school then the set of six local schools will only include either coeducational or girls' schools as these are the closest feasible alternatives for these children.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The decision to use six comparator schools is based on findings that show, on average, schools have six additional schools within a 10-minute drive (Burgess *et al.* 2006) making them potential alternative options for parents. It is difficult to say whether the schools in this study would have been a viable alternative for local parents if the Free School did not exist as many other factors are taken into account when choosing a school. For the purposes of this study, however, it is less important to know whether these schools might be considered as 'choices' by parents with the measure being used simply to understand the levels of disadvantage at schools within a local area. With the exception of two very rural secondary schools, all of the comparator sets were based within 10 miles of the Free School with the majority being much closer due to their urban locations. For robustness, the analyses have also been run using data from the nearest four, five and seven schools, resulting in generally similar results to those reported here.

A number of Free Schools are known as 'all-through' schools (Table 1). These cater for students aged 4-16 or 4-18 and are classed as single institutions. Despite this, they are still required to publish admissions procedures for the primary and secondary phases and most have opted to take children in both phases in their first years of

existence. In these cases, both the six nearest primary schools and secondary schools have been used as comparators and averages calculated.

In addition to analysing the proportions of FSM children in each Free School, in nearby schools and within the LA, segregation ratios (SRs) for each school are also calculated. The SR indicates the level of social stratification in an individual school; where the SR is equal to one for all of the schools in a defined area, there would be no segregation that year. But if a school has an SR of 0.5 it is taking half of its 'fair share' of disadvantaged children. As a result of this other schools will be taking proportionally more FSM eligible students. This could be calculated in relation to all schools nationally or for the relevant LA but for the purpose of this analysis the SRs for the nearest six schools to the Free School are presented in order to make comparisons on a local basis (Gorard *et al*. 2003). The SR is calculated as follows:

$$SR = (A_i/A) / (C_i/C)$$

where: A_i, the number of disadvantaged children in school i; C_i, the number of children in school i; A, the total number of disadvantaged children in a subarea; C, the total number of children in a subarea. For further detail on calculating segregation, see Gorard *et al.* (2003).

Results

Wave 1 Free Schools

In 2011 24 mainstream Free Schools opened. In their first year these schools educated 3,741 children, just 0.05% of all children attending state-funded mainstream schools in 2011-2012. Of these Free School students, 308 (8.2%) were eligible to claim FSM. This compared with a national FSM figure of 18.2% (DfE, 2013). The areas where the Free Schools are situated provide local and LA averages of 23.9% and 23.8% respectively, indicating that the first 24 Free Schools were substantially underrepresenting disadvantaged children when they initially opened.

Table 2 shows the percentage of students eligible for FSM at each of the first 24 Free Schools, as well as the proportion of FSM children at the comparison set and in the LA as a whole. The data indicate that six of the Free Schools took no children eligible for FSM in their first year. All of these were primary schools with three of them having a faith designation. Five of the Free Schools with no FSM children are located in southern, suburban or urban LAs, all of which had FSM levels at 20% or higher.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Similar findings were highlighted in an analysis of Wave 1 Free Schools by Gooch (2011). This paper aims to update these findings, and will continue with an analysis of the student compositions in these schools in their second and third years of existence.

In September 2012 the Wave 1 schools admitted a further cohort of children and by January 2013 (when the ASC was administered) 5428 pupils attended these schools (0.07% of all children in English mainstream schools). Of these pupils, 609 were eligible to claim FSM, meaning that the overall percentage of disadvantaged pupils in Wave 1 schools had increased by three percentage points to 11.2%.

Whilst this increase was potentially positive in terms of reducing pupil clustering within these schools and others nearby, the overall picture was still very much one of underrepresentation with most of the Wave 1 Free Schools admitting proportionally fewer disadvantaged children than other schools in their local area. Despite this overall underrepresentation 15 of the schools did increase their proportion of FSM pupils in their second year and only one school continued to take zero FSM students.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The data indicate, however, that in both their second and third year of existence 21 of the 24 first wave of Free Schools had FSM proportions below that of their LA (Figure 2). Calculations show very similar results when the Free Schools are compared with the percentages from the local set of schools. Whilst some of the Free Schools appear to be moving closer to their LA figure by their third year, for some of them there is still a considerable difference to overcome.

In the 2013-2014 academic year 12.6% of children attending the 24 Wave 1 Free Schools were eligible for FSM. This small increase in the proportion of disadvantaged children in these schools perhaps suggests that, as a whole, schools are gradually becoming more representative of their local areas. However, this overall figure neglects the fact that individually most of the 24 schools are still managing to take fewer poorer children than we might expect based on where they are located (Figure 1).

The SRs for this year further demonstrate this picture (Figure 2), highlighting the socioeconomically advantaged intakes of Wave 1 Free Schools in comparison to those in the most local area (where a SR of one would represent a school which has a composition exactly in proportion with other nearby schools).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Whilst there are a minority of schools that do appear to be taking nearly an equal share of disadvantaged children, 11 of the 24 schools have SRs of 0.5 or lower and 16 have an SR of 0.75 or lower. At this stage it is difficult to explain this underrepresentation. Some of the schools may still be working with relatively small numbers of pupils, meaning that just two or three additional FSM children could make a notable difference to the school's overall percentage or SR. The location of the school will clearly have some impact on the intake of the school. Yet that is not likely to be the only factor. Some of these schools with very low SRs are found in areas of high deprivation and have nearby schools with much higher percentages of

poorer children. There is likely to a much more complex set of factors influencing who applies to the school and who is allocated places. In addition to where the school is located, such factors may include the ethos or faith designation of the schools, the type of curriculum on offer, the admissions and allocation policies and procedures used and the type or reputation of other schools in the area. It is noteworthy that the six faith schools, the four that converted from the private sector and the one that offered an 'alternative' curriculum all had SRs of below 0.75 in 2013-2014.

Wave 2 Free Schools

In 2012 a further 57 Free Schools opened in England. For the purposes of this analysis data for the 47 mainstream primary, secondary and all-through Free Schools are used.

In the first year of these Free Schools opening, a total of 1004 of 4879 (20.6%) pupils were eligible for FSM, a higher proportion than the Wave 1 Free Schools in the same year. By the following year 1576 of 7817 (20.2%) of children attending them were eligible for FSM.

A key finding, therefore, is the difference in the levels of disadvantage between the first two waves of Free Schools. Whilst the majority of the first wave appeared to underrepresent disadvantaged students in their first opening years, the Wave 2 schools seem to show a more mixed picture. Table 3 shows the number and proportion of schools in each range for FSM eligibility. In their first year, for example, over half of the Wave 2 schools had FSM intakes of 20% or higher and five of them had intakes of over 50% FSM children. This continued in to the 2013 intakes too. There is a wider range in the percentages of FSM children at the Free Schools which first opened in 2012 but there are also more of them, situated in a more diverse range of locations.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Figures 3 shows each Free School and its 2013-2014 FSM proportion compared to the FSM percentage in the LA. Those markers above the line show Free Schools taking a higher proportion of disadvantaged children than their corresponding LA figure and those below took a lower proportion. Of the 47 Wave 2 schools, nearly half (22) had higher proportions of FSM-eligible children than their LA (Figure 3). This is in contrast to the majority of Wave 1 schools which, by their third year, had student compositions that did not reflect the levels of disadvantage in their local areas. It is perhaps important to remember here that the aim really should be for balanced intakes across all schools. Just as with the underrepresentation of poorer children, overrepresentation and clustering of disadvantaged children in a school will also not help the overall issues of segregation and social justice that were discussed above.

[Insert Figure 3]

Comparing the most recent Wave 2 data with LA data (Figure 3) indicates the extent to which the Free Schools are in line with the proportion of FSM children in the area

as a whole. The three schools which took no FSM children in their first year continued to do so in 2013-2014. Whilst the outliers highlight some substantial differences between some Free Schools and their LA percentages, a number of the Wave 2 Free Schools appear to have moved closer to their LA figures since opening.

[Insert Table 4]

Interestingly, however, the SRs show a rise in the number of Wave 2 schools which are underrepresenting disadvantaged children in relation to the six nearest schools (Table 4). In their opening year there were 17 schools which had an SR of 0.74 or below; in the following year there were 24 of the 47 schools with this measure. This figure includes seven of the 10 faith designated schools, all seven of the 'alternative' or 'specialist' curriculum schools (e.g. bilingual schools, specialist music or technology schools and Steiner schools) and a school which had private independent status prior to becoming a Free School. This finding raises questions surrounding how attractive these schools are to poorer families, whether they are applying for places at them and how the schools are choosing to admit students. As in the previous year, 12 Free Schools were deemed to be substantially over-representing FSM children (with SRs of 1.25 or higher).

Wave 3 Free Schools

In the 2013-2014 academic year a further 71 mainstream Free Schools opened in England. By the third year of the programme, therefore, a total of 142 mainstream Free Schools had opened and 20,947 children were attending them (0.3% of all children in English mainstream schools). Of these children, 17.0% were eligible for FSM, almost in line with the national figure of 17.4% (DfE, 2014b). Whilst some may use these overall 'headline' figures to suggest that Free Schools are now fairly representing disadvantaged children, such conclusions would be inaccurate due to the substantial variation between the schools. This section continues by presenting the data for the opening year of the 71 Wave 3 schools.

Table 5 shows the number of Wave 3 Free Schools within each FSM percentage range. It should be remembered that in some cases there is an issue with small numbers which may have skewed the results to some degree. Nevertheless the data is still useful in developing a picture of the school compositions in their first year.

[Insert Table 5]

Four of the primary Free Schools took zero FSM children in their opening cohort. Three of these are located in large urban areas with LA FSM percentages of 16% or higher. The fourth is a very small infant school located in a rural area with a LA percentage of 8.6%. Of the 29 schools with FSM percentages of 10% or lower, only eight had LAs with this same figure.

Conversely seven of the Free Schools (five secondaries and two primaries) have FSM percentages of 40% or higher. All of these are located in urban areas with high levels

of deprivation although in all cases the school percentage is still somewhat higher than the figure for the LA and the local set of schools.

Figure 4 completes this results section by showing the SRs within the specified ranges for each of the three Free School waves for the most recent set of data (2013-2014). Nearly half of the Wave 3 schools have SRs of below 0.75, indicating that they are taking less than three quarters of an equal share of poorer children. Of the 20 schools using faith-based admissions criteria or with a religious ethos, 12 had SRs of below 0.75 as did both of the two schools that converted from the private sector. It is also important to note that the most recent data indicates that many of the Wave 1 and Wave 2 schools are still substantially underrepresenting FSM children despite having a second or third cohort of children attending the schools, countering the argument that their intakes would 'balance out' after their opening year. Indeed an additional seven Wave 2 schools had SRs of below 0.75 in their second year of existence.

[Insert Figure 4]

Finally, it should be acknowledged that a number of Wave 2 and 3 schools had SRs greater than 1.24, and therefore were considerably over-representing disadvantaged children in relation to other local schools in 2013-2014. As discussed previously this is not beneficial in terms of equal distribution of children across a group of schools. The volatility of small numbers may also be a factor here although in some cases it is likely that location and admissions arrangements which prioritise those eligible for FSM may also have played some role.

Discussion

This descriptive analysis of Free School intakes provides an important insight in to the early years of the policy. In its development stages, the government claimed that the initiative would help to provide a better standard of education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Due to the huge amount of funding that has gone in to the creation of these schools it is important to know whether or not this has been the case. And if, as the current administration is claiming, Free Schools are improving education standards in England (Gove, 2013) then an understanding of how these schools operate and the children attending them is essential. In reality, it is still too early to judge the success of the policy based on attainment measures and standards but the ethical and social issues associated with potentially increasing segregation between schools can and should be scrutinised.

The purpose of this paper has been to give an insight in to whether Free Schools are taking their 'fair share' of disadvantaged children when considered alongside other local schools and the LA where they are situated. The findings indicate a varied picture. Some of the Free Schools have opened with higher proportions of disadvantaged children than other nearby schools whilst others appear to have gained balanced intakes from the beginning. Conversely, a number of the earliest Free Schools substantially underrepresented FSM children in their first intakes, and have

persisted to do so with subsequent cohorts of pupils. Such variance might be associated with the specific locations of the schools, the basic need for school places in a particular area, the methods used to attract students and allocate places or the type of education or ethos on offer. The data do not provide such explanations but further research focusing on the admissions policies and practices used by Free Schools, and the reasons why parents are choosing them may give a clearer understanding of how the intakes are established.

Previous authors (Burn-Murdoch, 2012; Gooch, 2011) have identified the disproportionately low numbers of FSM children in the first wave of Free Schools in their opening year. This study demonstrates that for many of these schools this underrepresentation continues into subsequent years, and that the intakes do not 'balance out' as more children are admitted to the school. If the schools continue to grow and at the same time, maintain stratified intakes then this could have considerable implications for the composition of other nearby schools.

The other two waves of Free Schools demonstrate a more mixed picture overall, although in line with the Wave 1 schools, those which have a faith designation/ethos, offer an 'alternative' curriculum or have previously been fee-paying schools seem more likely to underrepresent poorer children. Such findings are in keeping with recent studies that show an association between religious schools and advantaged intakes (Allen and West, 2011) as well as international findings which comment on the highly educated or more affluent families that choose Steiner or Montessori education (Dahlin, 2007; Rindskopf Dohrmann, 2003). The Free Schools programme has permitted the opening of additional faith schools and those that offer some kind of 'alternative curriculum'. Whilst for proponents of the policy this may appear to be enhancing 'choice' for parents, for those parents who are looking for a general or secular education, in a comprehensive environment, these schools would be considered no choice at all. Warnings that faith schools exacerbate religious, cultural and ethnic divisions within society (Cantle, 2013; West, 2014) seem to have gone unheeded in relation to the Free Schools programme as yet more are set to open in the coming year (BHA, 2014). In addition to these divisions, this study suggests that religious Free Schools are generally not taking an equal share of poorer children and therefore are not doing anything to improve the levels of segregation that already exist.

It is too simplistic, however, to attribute the underrepresentation of poorer children just to the ethos or curriculum of the school. There are other potential factors at work too. Location is important, not just due to the characteristics of the children that live nearby the school but also because of influences such as ease and cost of transport for those who live further afield. The extent to which a school is placed in an area that needs additional school places is also likely to have an impact on the numbers that attend the Free School and the share of disadvantaged pupils it takes. Some Free Schools have been set-up with a clear focus on serving communities with high levels of deprivation and this is reflected in their location and/or admissions arrangements.

This is admirable yet whether the composition of the schools will become less disadvantaged over time as has been the case with academies (Academies Commission, 2013; Gorard, 2009) remains to be seen.

Previous studies have commented on the effect of admissions arrangements on the intakes of schools (Allen *et al.,* 2010) and on the school choices that different groups of parents make (Burgess *et al.,* 2009). The admissions policies used by Free Schools vary considerably, not just between themselves but with other autonomous schools (such as academies) and LA arrangements. Some of the Free Schools also opt to operate their admissions outside of the LA coordinated programme (as they are allowed to do in their first year). It is, therefore, possible that some parents may have been unaware of or unwilling to complete additional applications required to gain a place at the school. Inclusive strategies need to be used by the schools in order to ensure that all local parents are well informed and supported during the application process and have equal access to all schools.

Some variation between schools in terms of their student compositions might naturally be expected and attributed to location, parent choice, ethos, reputation or admissions arrangements. However, in the case of Free Schools, the independence and freedoms they have promote 'difference' between themselves and other schools. Some might argue that this is not a problem as long as they are providing a good education for the children that attend them. But it is a problem if these children are simultaneously missing out on the social and cultural benefits of being in a more mixed environment. Moreover, the intakes of one school do not operate independently of all others, meaning that if Free Schools are over or under-representing disadvantaged children then it is possible that their local 'competitors' will see evidence of this in their own intakes. Whether this impact is being felt by these schools is an area to be addressed in future research.

It seems likely that some of the Free Schools, via their curricula, admissions, intakes or aims, will become almost indistinguishable from other types of schools. More concerning, however, are those who are determined to offer something 'different' either through the religious ethos they support or an alternative/specialist curriculum. This so-called 'diversity' in schooling, in reality, offers no additional choice to many families and runs the risk of helping to preserve an already socially stratified school system.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Stephen Gorard and Tom Perry for their helpful contributions to discussions surrounding this paper. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers who provided useful comments and suggestions on an earlier version.

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